Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)

The Role of External Parties in the Implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 598

War is a conflict which arises as a result of clash or divergence of particular purposes between at least two parties. War is commonly viewed as a social phenomenon which is derived from wide ranging sources.[1] Generally, war can stem from a deep-rooted historical conflict. This type of conflict can be ethnic, national, or religious hostility. It can also be a competition over natural resources or territory or a struggle over regional or global supremacy.[2]

In the case of Iran-Iraq War, Middle East scholars argue that the Iran-Iraq War occurred as a result of the ethnic and religious split which has separated Arabs and Persians, Shi'I, and Sunni Muslims since the seventh century,[3] and the struggle between Persians and Arabs for control over Gulf, Tigris, and Euphrates valley.[4] These scholars view that the conflict in Iran and Iraq was based on tribal and religious divergence. However, other scholar notes that the war was not about religion or historically rooted difference but rather about territory, influence,

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[1] (Karsh, 1990)
[2] (Karsh, 1990)
[3] (Grummon, 1982)
[4] (Marr, 1985)

and survival.[5]

Iran-Iraq War was one of the longest intra-state conflicts that occurred after the Second World War. The conflict itself involved the role of many parties in attempts to bring both parties together to resolve the conflict. The role of external parties exerted significant influence on the international community in implementing a resolution process. Considering the Iran-Iraq conflict as a threat to international security and the impact it had caused, the United Nations under its Security Council, imposed resolution 598 to restore peace to both states.

This writing has a purpose to examine the role of external parties in the Iran-Iraq War and its impact on the role of the United Nations in formulating and implementing the Security Council Resolution 598. This paper is not only elaborates the background of Iran-Iraq War and the description of the conflict. But also discusses the role of external parties in Iran-Iraq War and the role of the United Nations as a conflict resolution mechanism. In this part, the focus of Iran-Iraq War resolution is the United Nations. Then this paper sums up how does the impacts of the external parties' role in Iran-Iraq war in the implementation of the United Nations Security Council resolution 598.

1. Background of Iran-Iraq War

For almost a decade, 1980 through to 1988, Iran and Iraq wage a war against the other. Both countries have experienced the longest inter-state conflict after the Second World War. The most common view which is seen as a factor contributing to a battle between Iran and Iraq is a dispute over territory. At the basic

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[5] (Ehteshami, 2003)

level, according to Shahram Chubin and Charles Trip, there is the difference in size, demography, and geography between Iran and Iraq state. Iran has a larger land area while Iraq has a narrow land zone in the east.[6] In addition, there is a huge difference in demography. The Iranian population are greatly outnumbered the Iraqis (45 to 50 million Iranian,[7] 16 million Iraqis) and most of the Iran's military force are religious supporters.[8] There is also a strong belief that asymmetry in political relationships affected the conduct of the war.[9] As a revolutionary state, Iran has waged war "as a moral crusade and has been slow to recognize or at least admit the need to gain allies or access to arms" whereas Iraq gained support by "maintaining a strong economic and military supply relationship with France, Jordan, and Egypt".[10] Accordingly, clash could happen when parties posit different view in the ownership of land and demography. It should be considered that divergence in political views could also be accounted for the rise of war between the two states.

In most of the cases several scholars posit their arguments maintaining that geopolitics played an important part in the outburst of Iran and Iraq War.[11] The eruption of the war "is the product of the geopolitical interaction between two disparate neighbors". Thus geopolitics remains a central focus in understanding the causes of the war between the two countries. Of particular concern was the Persian Gulf region where the war took place. The region was considered as one of 'world's most strategic locations' as both nations claimed it to be their area of authority. Thus each side considers it is their right to

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[6] (Chubin & Tripp, 1989)
[7] It was estimated 45 Million Iranian (Stephen C Pelletiere, 1992) and 50 million (Richard Morgan Wilbur, 1990)
[8] (Pelletiere, 1992)
[9] (Chubin & Tripp, 1989)
[10] ibid
[11] (Pelletiere, 1992) (Karsh, 1990)

interfere in the region to defend their particular interest.[12] It is important to note that Persian Gulf area has been in 'seizure' of both nations.

The interest of both states in the Gulf dates back over a millennium. Since the nineteenth century, the Persian Gulf had been occupied by Britain. It became an important region to Great Britain in several aspects. First, the Gulf area was seen as a strategic asset to impose its colony. Second, of the great importance, was economic profit. Since oil was discovered in southern Iran, Britain expanded its control over the territory and formed a company to exploit oil and gain 51 percent of the revenues.[13] For almost a century, Britain exercised the power over the Gulf region. Taking into account the Shatt al-Arab waterway as the strategic area between Iran and Iraq, it is considered that Iran-Iraq War resulted from the vacuum of authority in Persian Gulf since the Great Britain announced its withdrawal from the region in 1960.

Given these considerations, the Iran-Iraq War has been largely influenced by regional disputes. On one hand, both powers viewed Persian Gulf as a strategic location for their nation's interest. On another hand, both states were reluctant to 'give up' this resource thereby preventing each one from exercising full authority over the area.

2. Description of the Conflict

Iran and Iraq engaged in military conflict on 23 September 1980 indicated by the land and air invasion of Iraq in western Iran. Territorial dispute over Shatt al-Arab

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[12] ibid
[13] ibid

watercourse was claimed to be the seed of the conflict.[14] It was the moment when the Iraqi president declared Iraq's intention to exercise full authority over Shatt al-Arab. He rejected the 1975 Algiers Agreement which contained significant Iraqi territorial concessions, including the separation of the Shatt al-Arab border.[15] Similarly, the note of Iraqi to the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran states that, "The president of Iraq denounced the 1975 Algiers Agreement as null and void, thereby reclaiming Iraqi rights, *inter alia*, to the waters of the Shatt al-Arab which, under the agreement, were to be shared along the *thalweg* (the median line of the main navigable channel)".[16] In addition to that, Saddam Hussein expelled 200,000 Iranians from Iraq and on September 22, 1980, he initiated large scale hostilities by attacking "at the level of an estimated four army division (45,000 men) and conducting air strikes on a wide front along the central and southern border".[17]

During September and October 1980, Iraqi forces gained the momentum in the conflict with Iran. Although the population was three times less than Iran, Iraq took an advantage from its forces which were better trained, equipped, and motivated.[18] The Iranian military power, on the other hand, had begun to deteriorate after the fall of Reza Shah Pahlevi. This enabled Iraq to take a chance to seize the western-Iranian oil rich region of Khuzestan and to capture the port city of Khorramshahr successfully.[19] Taking this opportunity, Saddam Hussein began to find a chance for negotiating a settlement from a position of strength with the new Islamic government in Tehran. However, his approach for a negotiated settlement was

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[14] (AFA, 2008)
[15] (Karsh, 1990)
[16] (Wang, 1994)
[17] ibid
[18] (Ali, 2001)
[19] (AFA, 2008)

rejected by the emerging Islamic government in Tehran, and the Iranian military was strengthened to resist the Iraqi forces.[20]

During 1981, Iranian forces launched their retaliation to regain their territory from Iraq. By performing the martyrdom operation or "human wave" due to the short supply of military equipment, the Iranian began to recuperate their strength. By September 1981, they had recaptured the most important oil-producing centre at Abadan.[21] The Iranian struggle had effectively pushed Iraqi troops out of the occupied territories and by early 1982, Saddam's military forces were forced back to Iraq. Iran proved its consistency to fight against Saddam authority. Under the influence of Ruhollah Khomeini, the Iranian leader, they declared that Iran would keep on struggling in order to topple Saddam's regime. In February 1984, Khomeini troops captured the oil-rich Majnoon Islands and the southern Iraq's Fao Peninsula in early 1986. 1984 was characterized by the attack of each other side by targeting the adversaries' capital city. This called "war of the city". The involvement of the United States and the USSR in the conflict began when Iran attacked Kuwaiti oil-tanker in the Persian Gulf in 1987.[22] The pattern of the war clearly showed the intention of both parties to assume power over the other. However, neither Iran nor Iraq seemed to prevail in the hostilities. In fact, both countries bear full consequences of what the warfare had caused.

The eight years battle between Iran and Iraq were formed by a number of factors. Apart from the search over territorial dominion and economic struggle for oil-resources, the conflict poses a high importance of ideological differences. Iraq adheres to an ideology that is basically secularist and nationalist;

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[20] (Ali, 2001)
[21] ibid
[22] (Wilbur, 1990)

while Iran is a religiously oriented ideology with a messianic, Universalist doctrine.[23] Iraqi president was alarmed by Iranian revolution. The revolution could pose a threat to Iraq. Therefore, Saddam Baath regime feared the Shia insurgency which was mostly influenced by Khomeini's Islamic Republic. Moreover, Shi'ites represents 60 percent of Iraqi population which were discriminated by a Sunni minority for a long period of time. The central of the conflict was the revolutionary Shia Islamism of Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Republic of Iran opposed to the Arab nationalism of Saddam Hussein's Iraqi regime.[24] This ideological difference was understandably. Saddam's intention to exercise control over the entire Arab region was denied by Iran who was largely comprises of religious devotee as oppose to secularist view of Hussein regime.

3. The Role of External Parties

a. The USSR Involvement

The inter-state war battle between Iran and Iraq not only engaged international community concern, but also external parties' involvement in attempts to settle the conflict between the two rivalries. The outburst of the war lighted a discussion among the Soviet policymaker concerning their appeal in supporting Iran. During the war, Soviets had put their effort to prevent either party from gaining control over the Gulf and consistently changing their support to defensive side.[25] The Iraqi initial invasion of Iraq in 1980 was considered offensive thus the Soviet Union decided to terminate their assistance to Baghdad and shifted their support by offering arms and supplies to

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[23] (Ismael, 1982)
[24] (AFA, 2008)
[25] (Wilbur, 1990)

Iran.[26] However, Iran refused the offer although it was militarily unprepared for a major war when Saddam Hussein ordered Iraq's armed forces across the border.[27]

In 1982, when Iran assumed its power on the war, Moscow recommended its support for Iraq while at the same time put its diplomatic effort for the purpose of bringing the war to an end.[28] It is worth mentioning Iraq and Soviet relationship in this particular case. Iraq and Soviet Union have declared their strong relationship by signing a treaty of friendship in 1972.[29] In addition, according to Wilbur, throughout the war, the Soviet Union remained Iraq's primary supplier of military support, most importantly in assisting Iraq to increase the level of weaponry after the Iranian reprisal. Of the particular concern were the Iranian offensive of 1983 and 1984 and the capture of the Fao Peninsula in 1986.[30] Soviet failure to maintain its relations with Iran had shifted its purpose from Iran by turning to support Iraq. What is more, the Iranian government had imprisoned several pro-Moscow Tudeh party members and had expelled several members of the Soviet embassy staff.[31] Thus, Soviet did not see the good intention of Iran to accept its offer.

The Soviet Union was not stand alone for the purpose to interfere the war. It maintained active cooperation with the US through the United States Sponsored Operation Staunch. The collaboration of Soviet and United States SOS in an effort to bring the war to an end through other than military means implied the interest of both states with respect to the Gulf.[32] Both superpowers maintained regular consultation and agreed

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[26] Ibid
[27] (Hooglund, 1989)
[28] (Wilbur, 1990)
[29] (Rakisits, 1988)
[30] (Wilbur, 1990)
[31] (Rakisits, 1988, p. 26)
[32] (Wilbur, 1990)

to exert a diplomatic approach to end the Gulf conflict. This diplomatic operation holds two basic reasons. First, to bring an end to the war thereby "maintaining the Gulf's status *quo ante bellum* while avoiding a direct superpower military conflict: the victorious power should not be in the position to dominate and destabilize the region". Second, "the Iran-Iraq War provided an arena for the unchecked proliferation of weaponry which had been initiated in the preceding decades by local governments with the support of the superpowers".[33] The concern of the two superpowers was based on the ground that there would be any third party interference in the gulf and the escalation of the war would go further. Taking into account Iranian access to military equipment and deployment of Chinese Silkworm anti-ship missiles in the lower gulf in 1986.[34] Accordingly, Soviet and the United States oversee the justification to intervene the war.

Beside the joint diplomatic mission, each superpower had planned its own policy approach in a response to gulf conflict. Rakisits notes that despite the improvement in bilateral relationship between Soviet and Iran in 1987 (the two countries maintained their cooperation in the area of power and steel, oil refining, joint shipping, and railroad building to link Soviet border with the Persian Gulf,[35] the Soviet Union had no favour to observe Iran's victory. Iranian prevailing poses challenge to Soviet in several ways. First, Soviet viewed that the victory could not only overthrow Saddam Hussein, which is Soviet ally, but it could also pose a military threat "to the maintenance of the regional status quo". Second, the outcome of such victory would have consequence "not only for the countries of the area but could potentially have a psychological effect upon the Muslim

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[33] (Wilbur, 1990)
[34] Ibid, p. 115
[35] The Sydney Morning Herald, 6 August 1987

population of Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union".[36]

In an attempt to prevent Iran from gaining a victory, the USSR took several approaches for this objective. First, it supported several attempts made by United Nations Security Council resolution for a cease-fire, particularly Resolution 598. Second, Moscow agreed in May 1987 to lease three of its own oil tankers to Kuwait. Third, Moscow agreed to send two minesweepers to Kuwait to remove mines laid in the channel leading to the port.[37] Fourth, it actively encouraged Syria to break its political alliance with Iran. Moscow's objectives for this approach "is to deprive Iran of a vitally important Arab ally, which if achieved would have major military repercussions for its war efforts; and it would be a major step in the USSR's desire to have a united Arab front for an international peace conference on the Arab Israeli conflict".[38] Soviet approach in this particular case accounted for its dynamic role in the region.

The USSR kept its nonviolent position in the conflict. This was essential considering the development of Gulf and Moscow's active role in the Middle East. Rakisits notes the objectives of Moscow's policy toward Iran-Iraq War is that "to prove its credentials as a legitimate regional power and to demonstrate that it can play a constructive role in the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict just as well as the United States".[39] USSR involvement in Arab countries—including maintaining its diplomatic missions with these countries region—dismissed the myth that US is a reliable superpower. Moreover, in the case of Iran-Iraq War, until September 1987, the USSR appeared to be playing a constructive role in the United Nations attempts to resolve conflict through peaceful means. As the conflict expert

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[36] (Rakisits, 1988, p. 27)
[37] The economist, 27 June 1987
[38] The Australian, 7 July 1987
[39] (Rakisits, 1988)